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PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV

DE RUEHAA #0651 1420718

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 210718Z MAY 08

FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0837

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3781

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1599

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 0171

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1466

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2035

RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0065

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1417

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2531

RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000651

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2018

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SAUDI AMBASSADOR SAYS OVER 1,000 TURKMEN PERFORMED HAJJ

REF: ASHGABAT 0171

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D).

¶1. (C) On May 19, Saudi Arabian Ambassador Abdel Aziz Al-Ghadeer told Charge that in 2007 1,100 Turkmen had received special Saudi hajj visas, in addition to the planeload of 188 pilgrims officially sponsored and funded by Turkmenistan's government (reftel). The ambassador somewhat reluctantly confirmed these numbers, and requested that Post not make this information public.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Al-Ghadeer said a Turkish travel agency had helped the visa recipients, who paid for their own pilgrimage travel, to arrange flights through Istanbul to Jeddah, then on to Mecca. He implied his embassy had coordinated this effort, but he declined to elaborate the details. He did note, however, that he expects Turkmenistan's government to fund three planeloads of pilgrims for the next hajj.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Post reported reftel that some Turkish businessmen resident in Turkmenistan had facilitated self-financed hajj trips of Turkmen Muslims in the past. We suspect the Saudis collaborated with the Turks to achieve the substantially larger number of Turkmen pilgrims who performed the most recent hajj. Because Turkmen do not need visas to travel to Turkey, a number of the Turkmen pilgrims might have received their Saudi visas in Istanbul. We suspect the Saudi Ambassador has been deploying "quiet diplomacy" to help the Turkmen authorities feel more comfortable with the large numbers of Turkmen travelling to Mecca to perform the hajj.

END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND